

THE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF BLINDNESS

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By EMIL FRIES *

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SUCCESS in overcoming blindness is mainly a personal and lifelong struggle of the handicapped individual. However, his success or failure will be determined largely by the attitude of his family and the public toward him as a blind person.

My interest in the subject has been stimulated because of previous experiences with the blind. My own lack of vision made it necessary for me to obtain part of my primary education and all of my high school training, as well as my knowledge of piano tuning, in the Washington School for the Blind at Vancouver. During this period of seven years I was grouped with the blind, studied, roomed, and dined with them, and was treated as blind by other people. The three years following my graduation I acted as assistant instructor in the vocational and physical education departments of the same school. It was then that I began fully to appreciate the position of the blind and at the same time became deeply interested in their various problems. By virtue of my profession of piano tuning, and my desire to participate in normal social functions, I come in contact with all classes of people; and because of the normal appearance of my eyes and my ability to get about unassisted, I pass as a sighted person. Due to these factors I am able to obtain their thoughts regarding the blind, and because of the amount of sight which I possess, I am able to appreciate the public's point of view. I never make it a point to tell strangers of my lack of sight, nor of my experience with the blind, unless the opportunity presents itself, and often it does not come about until I have enjoyed an interesting discussion pertaining to the blind. At such times I never lose the opportunity of giving the person with whom I am conversing a broader and more accurate conception of the blind. When dealing with those deprived of sight, I endeavor to correct *their* narrow conceptions of the public. For the most part this paper will deal with my own observations of the blind and with opinions of reliable blind people, including Sir Arthur Pearson, author of "Victory over Blindness", and such an authority as Dr. Harry Best, author of "The Blind".

* Edited by Thomas D. Eliot, Acting Professor of Sociology.

Let me say in the outset that the greatest difficulty one confronts in dealing with this subject is the over-sympathy and emotional reaction of the general public toward the blind. One can discuss cripples of practically every type, the deaf, and even the insane, with perfect candor and ease without causing discomfort among his listeners. But the prevailing sentiment of pity and the unruléd emotions toward the blind are so pronounced with most people, that they prevent a just, constructive criticism of the blind and frequently render such a discussion impossible. The average sighted person is so over-sympathetic that he excuses the blind for their faults, numerous as they may be. The same people who can enjoy pranks and jokes on cripples and deaf persons will usually feel hurt or embarrassed if similar tales are told about blind folk. Yet it must be noted that the blind, themselves, particularly men, usually enjoy jokes on members of their own group regardless of whether they originate from wits in their immediate circle or from their sighted friends. The many strange and laughable experiences that come to them through their inability to see are enjoyed as much as are the puns on our bald-headed brothers, toothless aunts, our partially deaf friends, and our fathers who are hobbling about with a slight touch of rheumatism. It is true that this attitude may seem heartless to many, but the fact remains that it is normal social intercourse and the blind participate in normal social practices. Therefore, let us consider them as normal beings and study them accordingly.

(Of all the perplexing problems that confront the educators of the blind, the most difficult one of all is to convince a recently blinded person that it is possible for him to battle his way through life without his physical sight.) However, when that has been satisfactorily accomplished another problem of greater magnitude presents itself. (Greater because the educators are unable to control it. It is the momentous problem of convincing the public that a blind person is able to do anything at all, to say nothing of the possibility of his earning his own living.) Regardless of how impossible this may seem, I am happy to say there are hundreds and thousands, of both men and women, who are succeeding admirably in earning their own livelihood. The lines of endeavor in which they are succeeding are wide and varied. According to Dr. Best, the latest available data prior to 1920 showed that nearly one-half of the blind gainfully employed were engaged in agriculture and in the various trades. The remainder of the gainfully employed are found in miscellaneous tasks in business and pro-

fessions. They are represented among the captains of industry, and as doctors, lawyers, ministers, professors, and legislators, to say nothing of the many noted musicians and successful piano tuners. When we read the immortal works of Milton, when we examine the scholarly histories of Francis Parkman and Professor Prescott, and when we revel in the thrilling novels of Basil King, there is not the slightest hint to make us feel that these authors were handicapped with blindness. The same is true of the wonderful musical compositions of Handel.

A more concrete example of what can be accomplished without sight is found in the life of Helen Keller, who is familiar to every man and woman in the country. At the early age of nineteen months she not only lost her sight, but hearing as well. Yet Helen obtained a secondary education and later a college training. Her autobiography has won her world wide fame as a literary artist. And her life is the world's outstanding example of complete victory over physical infirmities, and serves as an inspiration to all mankind.

The first question that arises is, "How do they do it?" They seem uncanny and their achievements superhuman. The attributed cause of their success is usually grossly exaggerated and misunderstood by most people. (Wonderful as the achievements of these unparalleled successes are, they form the basis of many of the misconceptions and false impressions of the blind commonly held by the public, because it is thought that most blind people are able to achieve the same measure of success that these few outstanding individuals have attained. (For overestimation of ability is nearly as harmful as underestimation.) At the best, both views are merely half truths and should be discouraged. (The guiding key to the success of blind people lies in the fact that when they have lost their physical sight, they still retain their mental "vision", which is comprised of determination, pluck, and perseverance.)

Personally, I feel that these factors are greatly overlooked by the students and psychologists who try to explain the success of the blind in terms of a fictitious psychology, which embodies a sixth sense. In the outset they fail to take into consideration the power of motivation of an individual. Furthermore, they forget that all forms of stimuli that figure in psychology are received and transmitted to the brain by the same end organs and nerves that determine the mental reactions of all normal people. I admit it is easy for those unfamiliar with the blind to attempt to explain

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their characteristics in terms of a special psychology. Not so long ago I believed this myself. (But I have come to the conclusion that the sixth sense which most people attribute to the sightless is merely the sum total of utilization of the other senses to their fullest capacity.)

In the past we have labored on the theory that when deprived of one sense, we are compensated with other powers that tend to offset our handicap. We have been prone to believe that the blind have been compensated with a keener sense of touch, and hearing, and even with a better memory. However, these notions have been disproved. (The person deprived of sight is only 80 per cent efficient, and it means that the four remaining senses must work overtime in order to make up the deficit.) Through constant practice and utilization of these senses they adapt him to his distinctive environment. This task falls mainly upon the senses of touch, smell, and hearing. The blind person does not hear better than his sighted competitor with his normal sense of hearing; he simply listens more intently and retains what he hears because of its importance to him and the constant practice to which his memory is subjected. The determining factor in hearing is to know what to listen for. Personally, I know it is the hardest thing to master when learning piano tuning. I have a friend who can detect the slightest trouble in his car by the sound it makes. It does not register on me because I do not know what to listen for. (It is simply a matter of development of one's potential capacities of hearing to the fullest extent, and of discriminating the significance of minor changes in the stimuli.)

Another thing that the public is unable to fathom is how a blind person can go from place to place unassisted and yet not lose his way. I agree with Mr. C. M. Adams, that the determining factors in keeping one's direction are largely the senses of smell and hearing, coupled with the ability to maintain perfect equilibrium, and the sense of touch, which has to do in this case only with the feet. They not only tell him as to the kind of material on which he is treading but also indicate the rise and slope of the streets and byways, and thus make it possible for him to know when he is off the walk or out of the path. The counting of one's steps is a futile practice, except in the case when one is trying to find a certain home in a block for the first time; this practice is valuable then, because in an ordinary block the average distance between house numbers is approximately four steps. In determining direction and orientation, the element of time consumed in

walking a given distance is important. However, this factor works in conjunction with the changes in atmospheric pressures which react upon the kinesthetic sense. These changes are created by different objects along the way. But by far the most important guide to the blind, in getting about, is his sense of hearing, which enables him to detect and recognize most minute echoes. Objects, from the size of a fence post to trees and gigantic skyscrapers, give a distinct echo of their own. There is a thinness or positiveness of sound which varies with the absence and size of objects. By this means the blind man knows when he is passing an alley or approaching an object. By the sense of smell one is able to know what kind of store or shop he is entering or passing.

In studying the blind one is confronted with all the problems that arise in the scope of human psychology. The reason is simply because the blind are essentially human, and certain problems of psychology are accentuated with them because of their fullest development and utilization of the other senses. These factors tend to lead astray some psychologists and those interested in the blind. In the words of Dr. Harry Best, "Whatever peculiarities the blind may be discovered to possess are little more than the result of the reaction of their condition upon their consciousness. They have few characteristics, aside from those directly traceable to the absence of sight, which other persons are without. (Whatever foibles and whatever virtues are found among mankind or exist in human nature, these are shared by the blind in not far from equal measure.)"

I have found that the greatest misunderstanding of the blind is instilled in the minds of the public by judging all such handicapped persons by one particular individual whom they happen to know. However, this is only natural, since the average sighted person has little opportunity to come in intimate contact with the blind. Moreover, it is human nature for people to take things for granted rather than to search for the underlying factors. And by far the worst feature of this is that the blind who are seen the most are the shiftless, "tincup" group who infest and occupy the busy street corners. True, these individuals are objects of pity, but mainly because they make themselves such. In spite of the fact that they constitute the minority group among the blind, the constant contact of the public with them not only discolors the good work being done by the successful blind in every part of the country, but it fosters the attitude that most persons deprived of sight are helpless and needy. The greatest harm from these nar-

row contacts is that they permit the public to group all blind people in a class by themselves and regard them with pity. This false conception is responsible more than any one thing for the fact that some educators and those interested in the sightless treat them simply as blind people, rather than as ordinary human individuals who possess the same feelings, emotions, ideals, and aspirations as normal men and women. Therefore, one has not merely one problem pertaining to the blind but as many problems as there are blind individuals. The educator who does not recognize this fact is a failure as far as his efforts with the blind are concerned.

In my opinion the public places the blind in a class by themselves because of the many irritating eccentricities which are common among them, and because of a spirit of selfishness. The latter view is seldom voiced in public but, nevertheless, it exists in no small measure, even among sighted teachers devoted to the blind. Personally, the most selfish people I know are blind, but on the other hand, my acquaintances among those of the blind who live normal lives are as gracious and appreciative as any one I know. I am convinced that these blemishes in character are due to environment rather than to blindness itself. Knowing the treatment they receive at home and from the general public, I am surprised at the great number of blind who are able to succeed later in life.

In the words of Sir Arthur Pearson, "Almost invariably the worst enemies our blinded soldiers have are their own loving wives and mothers." The same is true of parents in respect to their sons and daughters who lose their sight during infancy or later in childhood. They not only pamper the child from the time of its affliction, but shield the unfortunate one from normal intercourse with children of his own age. I am particularly interested in all boys, especially in those deprived of sight. My interest in them was stimulated during my last two years at the Washington school when I had charge of a group of fourteen boys varying in age from six to thirteen years, seven of whom were totally blind. I will mention three of them, Billy, Frank, and Joe, whom I consider fairly equal in capabilities.

Billy came from a family of four children living on a large wheat farm in Eastern Washington. He had been used to playing an equal part with his brothers and sisters in their various games; in addition to this he rode horseback, wrestled with the calves and colts, and did his part of the chores. Needless to say, when Billy

family

came to us at the age of six he could dress and feed himself fairly well and was an active leader among his playmates.

Frank has a cultured home, and an only sister. He had been petted and pampered from the day he was born. At the age of eight he entered our school, but he could neither dress nor feed himself. And what is worse, he did not want to learn. He had always been mollycoddled and never permitted to do anything for himself. This treatment had been so ingrained in him that he sulked and rebelled at the thought of being treated differently. Yet, under his stubbornness he was brilliant. His is an extreme case, but suppose he had been left to grow to manhood under conditions similar to those in his own home? If you will keep him in the same environment and then picture him at the age of twenty, you ought to know why many blind individuals acquire eccentricities and become utterly selfish and egotistical.

Joe is the most interesting of all. His parents are religious and cultured. When he came to us at the age of seven, he was able to dress himself and get along fairly well at the table, but he was a typical "mama's boy" in every respect. According to her, he knew no bad habits, and vulgar language could never be uttered by her dear little Joe. However, the other boys of his own age would not play with him. To them he was a sissy. He had a malicious streak that was hard to deal with, and in addition knew more obscene language than all the rest of the boys put together. He was quite active but unable to apply himself. He had never been allowed this privilege. When most of the teachers in the school had given him up as hopeless, I gained his confidence and analyzed his whole problem from as far back as he could remember. I soon discovered that he was a typical sex pervert. I learned later from his parents that they had made it a point to read the Bible to him every day and provide good music for his enjoyment. I next asked them how many dog stories and thrilling tales of adventure they had read to him and how often he played with other boys. Just as I anticipated, every inquiry was met with a negative reply. Here was a normal boy bubbling over with vim and energy, living under conditions far from normal, which were devastating to his normal development. The inevitable results of such a tragic situation must be so vivid in your imagination that it is needless for me to explain it. However, due to a little patience and study on the part of a few of us, Joe is one of the best athletes in the school today, is fair in his studies, and is respected by teachers and his fellows.

I have analyzed similar problems with young men in the early twenties who seemed utterly impossible to manage. They were not only unruly, ill mannered, and selfish, but extremely eccentric and perverted. In nearly every case I found their condition similar to that of Frank or Joe.

(The schools for the blind recognize the evils of pampering at home and endeavor to overcome them by teaching the pupils how to do things for themselves.) But recognition of a problem does not always imply thorough understanding. Many schools go to the other extreme by imposing such rigid discipline and practices as to stifle initiative and individuality. In employing these unscientific methods they disregard the influences of emotional reactions in the child. The "lock step" in marching to meals and classes still exists in several schools for the blind in this country. However, I want to say that this antiquated practice, to which I was subjected twelve years ago, no longer holds sway in our school and the more progressive schools for the blind, though it is still retained in some quarters. Naturally, a school which insists on such rigidity employs other methods even more injurious to the normal development of physique and personality of the individual.

(In my opinion, the most important means of rehabilitating the blind is strenuous physical education.) It works off the surplus energy, which might otherwise develop into eccentricities, and is important in developing normal physique and muscular coördination. But the greatest gains derived from this training are the development of the personal appearance and self-confidence of the individual, which enables him to get about unassisted. However important this training may be, it is subordinated in many schools to languages, mathematics, music, and mental hand work, which have little effect on physical development and are impractical for many students.

(My point is that the individual is not given enough special consideration in the educational system. Consequently, he is often ill fitted for life and becomes bitter towards his school and toward society in general.) He is unable to adjust himself in industry and society and does not care to turn to his former instructors for encouragement. That would be admitting defeat. Consequently, he tells his story to other blind acquaintances, worse off than himself. This group broods about its misfortune, envies the successful blind, and feels slighted by the seeing. This type of fellow is unable to meet the public on equal footing, hence he is forced into the under-current of gloom and pessimism.

A typical example is Jack, who has now been out of school fifteen years. He graduated from a mid-Western school for the blind carrying with him all the objectionable marks of home pampering and institutional repression. He was eccentric, extremely moody, selfish and, needless to say, difficult for others to get along with. In spite of these handicaps, Jack was an able pianist and sang beautifully. Shortly after his graduation, he performed on the stage successfully for several years. Like many other people, he could not stand prosperity and praise, and before long his conceited notions about his abilities made him unpopular with the manager and the rest of the company. He was dropped for the time being on the condition that if he would keep in practice he would be called soon to a new theater that was being opened. The sudden jolt was too much for him, and instead of waiting for the company as he was asked to do, or else finding similar work, he listened to the advice of former friends who told him he could make enough money on the street in a little while to tide him over. Like all self-respecting blind people who enter this means of livelihood, Jack could not reconcile himself with the thought of following begging. He was going to get out of it as soon as he had saved enough to get back into his former work. But no longer does he apologize for holding down a street corner, for now he firmly believes that the world owes him a living. He boasts of making sixty dollars in four hours and wonders why a friend of his is foolish enough to toil all day at a dusty broom machine for four dollars and a half. Like many others, Jack gave up his struggle for an honest career and became a beggar because the ready assurance that a blind person can always prevail upon the pity of the public for financial support, robbed him of the determination necessary for success. His case is a result of lack of proper social and moral training on the part of his parents and teachers and of pity on the part of the public: conditions which in every case produce an unbalanced and poorly integrated personality.

The successful blind people are those who refuse to be defeated; and hence, they battle on for recognition in industry as well as for equality in normal social groups. The true test of one's courage and convictions does not come until he is graduated and on his own resources. The same test comes to the recently blinded adult who has undergone partial rehabilitation. The crux of the matter resolves itself into this question: Is the optic nerve of more value in achieving success than pure "nerve"? Obviously not,

for I have yet to learn of the successful blind person who cannot honestly attribute most of his achievements to sheer pluck and perseverance.) It is pure "nerve" more than anything else that enables him to cross busy streets unafraid, it is "nerve" that makes him a successful business or professional man, and it is pure "nerve" that makes him demand a legitimate place in society. To lose one's "nerve" is to admit a crushing defeat and usually means a future along the line of least resistance, which is always downward. This explains in large measure why some brilliant and well educated blind people have not made a place for themselves in society.

(Lack of industry and absence of normal social contacts permits the blind to brood introspectively on their own misfortune.) A certain amount of introspection is necessary and beneficial to every one, but when overworked it results in one of two serious handicaps, namely: egotism or a decided inferiority complex. Conceit and selfishness can usually be traced directly to the egotistic habit paths of introspection.

Thus far I have tried to show the blind at their best as well as at their worst, and have tried to explain the reasons for their marvelous achievements, their failures, and major faults. However, I want to make it plain that no two blind people quite agree as to the causes of their success nor as to methods that should be adopted in the education of the blind. This likewise is partly true of their educators and those interested in them.

(I now want to present the grievances of the blind toward their sighted brothers. In their generous efforts and willingness to aid the blind, most sighted folk do as much if not more harm than good. Because "they have too much pity for their blindness and not enough sympathy with their human nature.")¹ For some reason they think that when a person is deprived of sight he is unable to hear. They not only ask questions about him in his presence, but when he is at the dining table they will ask his friend or relative instead of himself as to whether he wishes sugar in his coffee. These are trifling matters but you can easily see the impression it leaves on the blind guest. He regards it as a reflection upon his mentality. This failure on the part of the host to meet the blind guest on equal common footing is due to his disregard of the value of recognition which is one of the primary wishes of human nature.

(In their desire to assist a blind person to a chair, to the tele-

¹ *Victory Over Blindness*—Sir Arthur Pearson.

phone or to the street car, they literally carry him, which often throws him off his balance, making him lose his orientation. Unless you are familiar with blind people, the safest thing to do is to let them take hold of your arm and in this way assist them to wherever they wish to go.

When you have them as guests in your home or at parties, do not provide special conversation and entertainment for them, but simply let them enter into the things you enjoy and usually you will make friends with them because you are treating them as ordinary people.

Do not hesitate to greet them whenever possible. A "Hello" and a handshake to the blind have the same cheering effect that a wave of the hand and a friendly smile have to everyone. For some reason many sighted persons have the idea that the blind do not want to be disturbed in their thoughts, hence they avoid rather than recognize them. Personally, I know this one factor has not only prevented friendships from forming but has discouraged many blind people from mingling with sighted persons.

If you have something you want to show a blind person, for goodness sake do not ask him if he wants to feel, touch or rub it. That simply makes him conscious of his misfortune. Ask him the same as you would any of your friends, if he wants to see it. It amuses every sighted person to hear for the first time a blind person say, "Let me see it", "I want to see it", or "I saw it". But after all, is there any essential difference in becoming acquainted with a certain thing through physical vision or by sense of touch? In the last analysis the result is the effect of mental reactions. They why is it absurd for blind people to say, "Let me see your hat or tie"?

My chief indictments of the public are, first, their habit of discriminating against the blind in industry and society and their false conception of charity, which is based on pity. I have found that many people flatter the blind in their achievements when in their presence, and at other times throw doubt and slighting reflections on the work they are doing. This is due primarily to the fact that many people believe the blind are incapable of doing anything at all except performing as musicians. Because of this prevailing attitude, many blind are deprived of the opportunity to demonstrate their abilities in many lines of work. In many cases this sentiment of the public forces the blind into menial tasks incapable of furnishing a livelihood. Hence, the only alternative for individuals of this type is to commercialize their blindness and

receive charity from the hands of the public. I admit that all the blind are not efficient in the work they claim they can do, but usually this shortcoming is due to defect in character or lack of proper training, and is by no means characteristic of all the blind.

Secondly, most people discourage rather than encourage the blind, particularly those who have just lost their sight. I admit the misfortune seems insurmountable, but discouragement from one's friends can only make matters worse. It is due primarily to pity, which has no constructive value to offer. Pity is the basic principle of our system of charity and explains in part why we have not progressed further in it. I commend those employers who have tried to humanize industry by finding a legitimate place in it for blind, deaf, and crippled instead of spending huge sums of money for charity. This movement is based upon the attitude, "If they can do the work, such handicapped individuals should have first preference". The Miller Lock Company of Philadelphia reports the following from their experiences with blind workers in their factory: "The blind workers are a happy and contented lot. Many of our workers have admitted that, since coming into our plant of these 'sons of the dark', they have found that they have been happier in their own troubles, simply due to the fact that they have seen how happy a person could be who had a real affliction. . . . Soble was recently offered a position as a broom maker with the promise of making more money than as a drill-press hand. 'No,' he replied. 'You see, if I go to making brooms again I'll have only a blind man's job. Here I have a job just like anyone else and am treated like anyone else.' "

The whole point has been admirably expressed by Sir Arthur Pearson: "Happiness comes from doing, from exercising one's creative faculties, whatever they may be; and he who finds ample opportunity for fundamental expression needs no one's pity. [This is the only sane and constructive method of charity except for the sick and aged, and almsgiving should be looked upon with disfavor.] Don't pity the blind. They don't want your pity and they can't use it if you give it to them. There is something they want and something for which they have a right to ask, that is the normal spirit you are willing to extend to equals everywhere. Coöperate with the blind man and you will both be stronger for it. Pity him and you will both be weaker. Pity exhausts the giver and demoralizes the recipient."

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